CROSSING THE GREAT CATARACTS OF THE ORINOCO

The Amazing Crocodile and Turtle Hosts Viewed by Caspar Whitney on Interesting Trip—Crocodiles Sometimes Raid Indian Villages and Carry Off Children and Even Adults—Difficult to Approach

By CASPAR WHITNEY.

FORTY miles separate Maipures on the upper Orinoco from Atures on the lower Orinoco, and every mile of it is filled during the wet season with fever, and always with insects and scenic splendor. Sending up a roar at either end which may be heard a mile or more the river throughout its picturesque course plunges and whirls and flattens, expands and contracts according to the character of the obstacle impeding its progress. Occasionally narrowing to a couple of hundred feet, it lashes into one long stretch of foam and vapor as it riots between rock lined shores; again it speeds along between wood covered banks in comparative calm. In some spots it presents an unbroken surface, in others thickly placed rock islands leave turbulent channels scarcely twenty feet wide. Often on its banks a palm of unusual height and beauty lifts its feathery top above the surrounding jungle, and every once in a while conical "cerros" (mounts) rise from fifty to two hundred feet, now out of forest, again out of rock covered meadow, standing isolated or in groups as last monuments of the crossing sierras through which the tumultuous river has literally carved a thoroughfare.

Ever in the background may be seen one of the mountain spurs which the Parimas send off in several directions under varying names from the centre of that immense region bounded on three of its sides by the Orinoco, and whence rise the Ventuario, the Caura and the Caroni rivers. The mountains close in on the south entrance to this land pass, while at the north gate at Atures a lone but lofty cerro rises out of the plain to the west. It is a scene of rare charm, unique in nature's offerings the world over. The pity that also it should be a notorious pest hole! for here the ascending voyager comes first to know a real plague of insects. He makes painful acquaintance with the "zancudo," the giant gnat despoiler of the night, and with that vicious daylight worker the little "jen-jen," a venomous fly relative of the Brazilian pium. The "calentura," as the fever is called, also adds danger to discomfort; while the withering humidity incubates the poison deposited in susceptible veins. Although no hotter during the day than elsewhere on the road (the average of my thermometer in February-March was 88 degrees to 90 degrees and in June 95 degrees), the nights are excessively muggy and, as on the river beyond Esmeralda, unrelieved by any breeze. But of local evils Zancudo & Co. are, to my thinking, the most formidable; you may escape the fever, but the jen-jen and its night shift are inevitable. On these two insects rests all odium for the distracting annoyances which beset the wayfarer on the portage.

As if their life's burden was not already heavy to the crushing point, jaguars keep the poor, straggling Indians hereabout in more than usual terror—presumably one of Mother Nature's little ironies in thus guarding with wild beasts, as it were, a spot essentially so uninviting as to repel residence. If there were cattle on the isthmus the rather open and rock filled savannas of the west side might offer bait for "el tigre" (jaguar), and give just cause for his bad name, which, as it is, seems to me undeserved.

We had wretched crossings going down—three days of heavy rain, with intervals of zancudo attack, which usually attains to activity nothing short of fiendish just before and just after a downpour, and two of the crew rolled in their blankets fever stricken during practically the entire passage. Luckily we had less portaging along shore on the up trip, which consumed the better part of a week, although log rolling the canoe overland would have come as a welcome relief to our short handed drudgery among the granite blocks of the rampant river, that not only snatched the canoe out of hand but hurled us aside contemptuously as it willed. Yet the shooting-the-chutes way we slipped through some of the narrow channels gave exhilarating moments that repaid the toil of the heavier, less enlivening work.

After so tempestuous a portage, the lull and the indolence of the bay at the northern harbor (Atures) was balm to high tension nerves and jaded muscles.

On passing the Meta one comes into a new country; the banks grow more open and varied, the forest scatters, the mountains recede, animal and particularly bird life increases. The river widens, sandy shores come first in evidence and, because of the more gentle land slope, the speed of its current slackens, while islands and bays in places give it almost the appearance of an estuary. It is the same Orinoco, only now tamed, though here and there it breaks the peace bonds for a short period of rampage. Expanding to over a mile in width after the run through Zambore, it is never less and sometimes adds another mile en route until at Urbana it spreads, according to season, from two to four miles.

The character of the contingent country undergoes as much change as the river itself. From the quarter mile mouth of the mud colored Meta, all that west bank to the Apure is so low, even in its northern quarter, as to become largely flood land in high water. On the east bank the isolated rock cerros make practically their last important appearance a bit north of the bay at the Meta; while the mountain spurs to which, on the descent, one has become accustomed, diminish and withdraw until a short two-mile spur five or six hundred feet high off Urbana is the first signal of the plain country and the last vanguard of the mountainous interior—the beginning or the end, according to whether you are headed up river or down.

Between the Meta and a little settlement called Caicara, just inside the bend made by the Orinoco's sharp turn to the east, are many exposed beaches of islands and flood land and sand shoals—loosely called "playas." These are the chosen and populous resorts of the crocodiles and the turtles. At the lowest water the latter gather in multitudes, and while the New World representative of the Old World saurian is mostly in evidence in the time of rains and affects the shoals and the flood land, the turtles are more discriminating, and confine themselves to the islands, especially the islands near Urbana, which is half way between Caicara and the Meta. Here in February and March nature puts on view one of the most remarkable of her amazing exhibitions—a spectacle like unto that of the great flamingo nesting colony with which the illuminating photographs and studies of Frank M. Chapman have acquainted us.

There are two kinds of turtles on the Orinoco: one bears a dark green shell about a foot in diameter; the other averaging twice as large, weighs about fifty pounds and has a grayish shell and flat head heavily furrowed between the eyes. Neither of these is found on the upper river, but a fresh water tortoise, about the size of and similar in aspect to the smaller, is said to abound above the cataracts and to supply edible eggs and flesh to the Maquiritares. I sometimes saw this turtle in the water, and learned that though it is sought for food it does not, like the larger one, lay in colonies and therefore conducts no yearly assemblage to attract the Indians. On the lower river the smaller is an inconsequential figure denied even the right of its generic name, for the natives commonly employ only the general term, "tortuga," which simply means turtle, and is invariably and exclusively applied to the large one.

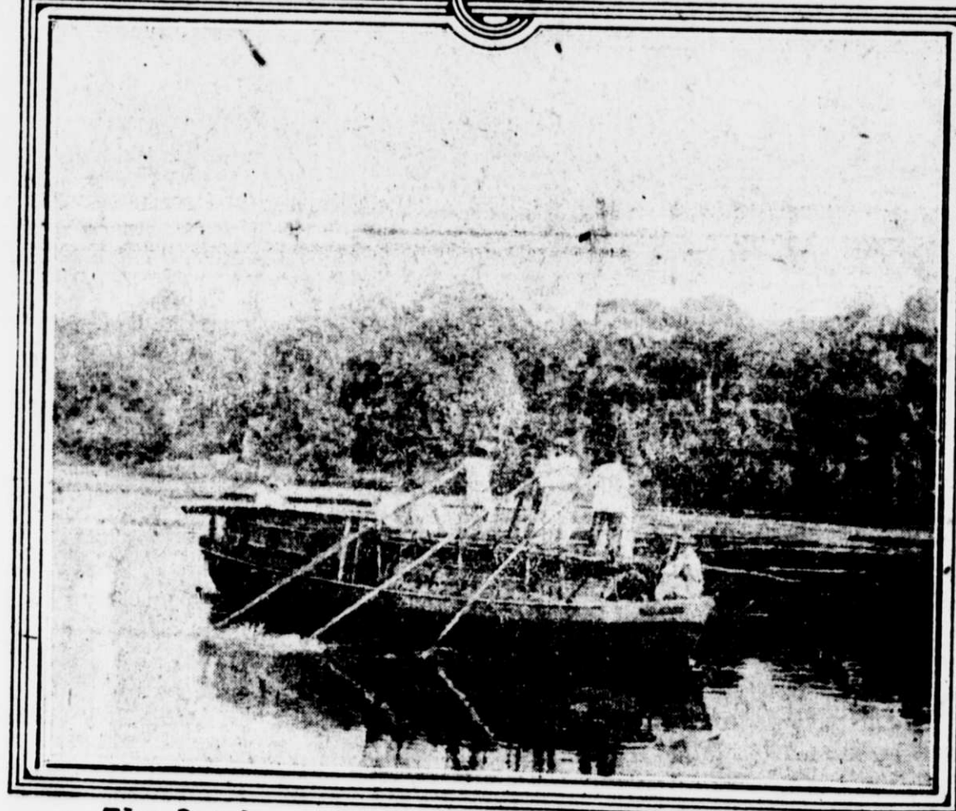
A Trader's Camp at Santa Isabel, on the Rio Negro, Among the Rocks.

On the Amazon the turtle lays its eggs in September, but on the Orinoco extreme low water comes in late January, and at that time in the waters furthest from travel and on the islands amid the least used channels begins the gathering of the tortuga host.

And what a host! I have seen the beach of an island literally covered by them and could have seen the same sight on many other beaches had I not confined my observations to the one out of respect to the feelings of the natives, who during these periods avoid the known breeding grounds so the turtles will not be disturbed. During all of February the turtles thus disport themselves on the beaches under the burning sun—a necessary stimulant, the Indians maintain, to the following function of egg laying. Early in March the sun bath being completed and the signal set, the turtles swim in companies to such other beaches as they have been wont to frequent only for the purpose of laying their inch round, white eggs.

It is an accepted fact among the Indians that whereas great throngs of turtles sun together on a given beach, they divide into troops when the eggs press and journey to other beaches, the same each year if unmolested. On the beach of these chosen islands, always in the night, they deposit their eggs in holes of about two feet in depth by as much in diameter, digging rapidly with their powerful feet as the pressure comes upon them. At times when the seemingly uncontrollable egg flow has prematurely started they usurp the prepared or even partly or entirely filled nest of a nearby and more provident turtle. The Indians of the Orinoco say the tortuga lays from seventy-five to 100 eggs each. Naturalist Bates, whose thorough studies on the Amazon give authority to his statements, says the Amazonian turtle lays 120 eggs; and on both divisions of the Flowing Road, the clutch, if I may borrow the word, occupies about half the hole; which for the rest the turtle dirt fills level with the beach in which it is dug.

Until the turtles have all deposited their eggs the Indians protect them from intrusion, but once the holes are filled they lose no time flocking to the scene, and forthwith, in the last of March or first of April, the harvest begins. With long slender sticks they travel up and down the beach sounding for the covered eggs, often destroying many, despite the tough membrane casing, in their eagerness to outstrip a companion explorer. It is not the harvest it used to be when the catch was large enough to bring plenty to practically all of the inhabitants on the river between Atures and Apure. The same old story of greed with which we of the North are familiar, leaving no eggs to hatch, is answerable for the depleted supply. Traffic in oil is still an item of local importance, but as about 2,000 eggs are required to produce a gallon the demand on both the supply and native industry is too heavy to warrant serious development in a commercial way.



The Batelao or Trader's Cargo Boat of the Rio Negro

Nor is man the only one to exact toll of the tortuga. The eggs which are overlooked by the natives are sought with persistence and rising appetite by jaguars, crocodiles, herons and various members of the rat family, the jaguar preying also upon the turtle itself, which he turns on its back to helplessly await the pleasure of this great cat's feeding.

Such eggs as escape intelligent search and predatory prowlers hatch out little turtles, which under cover of night unaided dig out of their sand hole, and unguided find their way to shallow water, where if the bottom is rock strewn they are safe from all their enemies, even the crocodiles. A striking illustration of hereditary instinct, it seems to me, for it is, no doubt, because of an inherited struggle for existence that the tortuga invariably deposits its eggs and the hatched appear in the protecting darkness.

Not so with the crocodile—it has no need to hunt seclusion or the cover of night to produce its young. On the playas its eggs are deposited in several separate holes and at the time of hatching the mother, in the broad light of day, returns to help the young out of the sand and to herd them back among the overflow pools where life is more prosperous and less liable to accident. Like the jaguar, the crocodile of these remote parts has nothing to fear on land or in the water unless it be one another. The Indians used often to tell me of fights between these two in which the jaguar was mostly the loser—but I never saw such an encounter or knew of such a one being authenticated. No doubt in the water a full grown crocodile could worst a jaguar and as the latter are occasional swimmers and usually range near a stream, such combats are entirely probable. I cannot, however, picture a jaguar beaten on land by a crocodile, be it ever so large.

It is commonly said that crocodiles are vicious and aggressive. First and last, in Malaya and South America, I have seen quite a lot of the brutes and hold the contrary belief, with the reservation that they are quite liable to attack if they can do so unobserved. In other words, I consider the crocodile a coward that will never assail you if your eye is on him. It is true the hideous creature will lurk about a settlement or at a specific spot from which it has been driven. In my own experience I have known of its repeatedly entering at night the compound of a small collection of huts on the Malay coast to terrorize the wretched people and finally to seize and partly carry off a sleeping young woman.

Where not effectually repulsed, i. e., actually hurt, it will sneak again and again to a locality where a tidbit offers, such as dog or pig or chicken or child, growing bolder with each unharmed adventure until it really reduces the place to practical vassalage. Often some little settlement is thus held in subjection until guns are brought to raise the siege—knives and arrows being as a rule the extent of armament at the average Malayan hut. At such a terrorized hamlet, where a baby boy had been seized at its play in broad day near the water whence it had strayed, I once spent a week of bloody warfare, killing a baker's dozen of the beasts—three of them in the basin whither the people went for their water. Many a dog or small pig has been seized as it lowered its head to drink and often a child sent to the water hole unaccompanied or unaware of danger has been dragged in as it stooped to fill the jar—for the water hole is a favorite lurking ground of the crocodile which has singled out a village for toll, and even the men and women need to be on the lookout.

The crocodile hunts singly; I have never heard of a case where they have invaded in company or of an instance of seizure in which more than one has been concerned.

My opinion is that the crocodile, which preys upon a number of smallish, more or less to its eyes doglike jungle animals, such as the several tiny deer in Malaya and the many members of the rat family in South America, has its attention first drawn to these hamlets by dogs, perhaps, and thus on forays becomes acquainted with the chickens and the humans, while with pigs it already has a jungle intimacy. Moreover, the crocodile is a forager which takes whatever in its sneaking path is unaware and not too large; an opinion, so far as disposition is concerned, shared by no less eminent a zoologist than Raymond L. Ditmars, curator of reptiles at the New York Zoological Park, who says that in captivity the crocodiles become so bold as to attack the careless or unwatchful keeper. In the wilderness, so far as my observation goes, what the crocodile secures it takes away to devour alone if it can or fights for a share if it must; it does not drag its victim to the water if it is not interrupted or pursued or if its quarry can be consumed on the spot. Considering the smallness of its throat, the theory that it enjoys mostly the blood and fat may account for its never seeking anything so large as, for instance, the capybara. I have seen it rend on the spot of seizure a small animal about the size of the common rabbit, and I have seen several crocodiles fight savagely over a poor dog one of them had dragged into the water from the bank, where it was incautiously drinking.

What I have written here of the crocodile foraging for human meat is the result of far Eastern observation. I have never heard of similar exhibitions along any part of the road, or indeed in any part of South or Central America or Mexico or Cuba or the West Indies where I have journeyed. Yet the natives everywhere have a firmly established and entirely warranted dread of the loathsome beast, which, while never attacking in the open, so far as I have ever heard, is always liable to pounce upon a helpless victim unconscious of its presence. That is why in crocodile infested rivers you should never from the bank dip up water without first exploring it with a long stick, for to lie close to the edge and thus catch the drinking animals is a favorite game of the ugly thing; nor should you approach water holes without careful scrutiny of the jungle immediately surrounding. Moreover, it is helpful to bear in mind that the crocodile belongs to the arrant class that ambush their quarry, and you need never fear the one in sight. The yarns about crocodiles attacking men in canoes and knocking them off the stern with their tails into the water for easier capture are fully out of accord with my experience and probably may be classed with the weird stories which filter through town confined Government officers and sea captains to tourists who spread them in more substantial forms.

On the playas of this reach of the Orinoco on two descents I saw more crocodiles than I thought the entire river held; yet they were surprisingly difficult of near approach. Time and again after a very careful stalk to where I had viewed a troop sunning I came within camera range only to see them sliding into the water, and although I shot many I never succeeded in being near enough for a photograph when there was a fair light. I do not regard the killing of them as sport. My shooting was for the purpose of securing data on their length, and I picked out of each company only those which appeared unusually large; incidentally I found them fairly easy practice here, making a very much higher average of kills than in Malaya, where mostly one must take them in the water, and unless killed instantly they are apt to go to the bottom. The biggest crocodile I potted on the Orinoco measured twelve feet three inches and was next to the largest one I saw, which could not have been short of fifteen feet as he lay apart from companions on the point of a long sand shoal. I felt so sure of securing his photograph that I left my rifle in the canoe when from the bank on the down stream side I began a cautious approach, hidden by the slant of the playa; but when after arriving near the end I crawled to the crest with camera ready no crocodile giant was in sight. I sometimes wondered after such experiences if they could scent me; and at least I learned that for all his sluggishness a crocodile can move quickly if need be.

GETTING IN TRIM FOR THE TEAM BY A NEW METHOD

One hot afternoon a few summers ago a young man was walking along a New Jersey country road. In one hand he carried a small valise, in the other a large case, such as travelling men use to carry their samples. Midway between two towns he was overtaken by a farmer driving along in a buckboard.

"Goin' to town?" asked the farmer.

The young man said that he was.

"Jump in and I'll give you a lift."

"Thank you just the same," replied the young man, smiling, "but I guess I'll walk."

The farmer threw him a surprised look. "Five mile to town," said he. "Must be pretty heavy what you're carryin' there. Better hop in."

"No, thank you," said the young man, still smiling. "It isn't very heavy, and much obliged, but I guess I'll walk."

The farmer grunted and drove on. Returning home he again encountered the young man, a mile from town. He drew up.

"Mind tellin' me, asked the farmer, "what you're luggin in that there bag?"

"Kitchen utensils," answered the young man. "Just sold a skillet and a pie pan to your wife a while back. Saw you in the barn hitching up."

"And would you also mind tellin' me why you'd ruther lug 'em around in the hot sun when you might just as well ride?"

"Why, no," answered the young man, and his smile broadened a bit. "I've walked with these bags over a good part of the State. You see, I'm going to make a try for the football team in the fall and I'm doing this to get in condition."

The farmer shook his head and told the horse to "giddap." If he had thought to have asked the young man's name, and if he had looked on the sporting pages of any of the New York papers that fall he would have seen that all this "dum foolishness" (as he thought it) had served to accomplish a purpose. For the young man not only made the Princeton eleven but he turned out to be one of the very best guards in the East.

In a few weeks now the college football player, after an absence of nine long months from the sporting page, will pop suddenly into view. He will be heralded first by a small announcement toward the bottom of the last column, sidetracked from the path of the box score, which still enjoys the right of way, stating that the candidates for such and such a college team have been ordered to report for practice at such and such a place on such and such a day. A little later comes another announcement—the candidates have reported. After a while, about the middle of September to be more exact, accounts of daily practices from various college towns will blossom modestly, though regularly, into type. The baseball player, feeling the intrusion of a stranger within his domain, will put on a new burst of speed. The fight for the pennant grows hotter, box scores bristle with a new and poignant interest, championships are won in both leagues. Then a short lull, the prelude of a mighty storm. The world's series bursts like a skyrocket across the sporting page, forces all other matters of importance out of the way, usurps the right hand column of page number one, and, after a final burst of glory, suddenly disappears. The day of the baseball player is over. He packs away his uniform grimy with the dust and sweat of a hundred and fifty-odd battles and is hustled unceremoniously back to his billiard parlor or his shoe store or whatever rendezvous he makes his own during the long cold months before the coming of spring. His place has been taken by another. The college football player has arrived.

But to the football player himself his arrival doesn't come with anything like the suddenness that it does to the reader of the sporting page. He has been thinking of it and preparing for it a long time in advance. He is thinking of it, in fact, as soon as the last big game of the season is over. At the banquet following the game the coach is called on for a speech, and whether the speech is touched with the jubilance of victory or with the melancholy of defeat there is always one prominent, inevitable note. "Don't forget next season," warns the coach. "You men who don't graduate in June will be out working for the team next year. Some of you subs will have to be regulars next fall. But you will have to be better than you are now. You've got to make yourselves better. You've got to keep in good condition. Don't get it into your heads that you're through with football until the first game next October. For some of you right now is just the beginning."

Then follow the winter and spring before college closes in June. The coach must keep a vigilant eye on all his men. He must see that they don't smoke too much, that they don't drop around too frequently in places where steins are bumped down on tabletops and songs vibrate through the smoky air. He must interview professors to see how certain men are making out in their studies. This latter is no trifling job. Because a man is a good football player it doesn't follow that he is a good student. Some coaches will tell you sadly that just the reverse is true. Then, for a month, spring practice is resumed. Then commencement, and before college closes another meeting at which the coach warns the men against getting "out of shape" during the hot months of summer.

Peddling kitchen utensils on foot is only one way in which hundreds of young college football players spend their vacations getting in shape. You can find many of them working as farmhands, getting up with the roosters at 4:30 or 5 in the morning and going to bed at 9 o'clock at night, and filling the intervening hours with the man's labor of pitching hay and harvesting crops. Others make for the Canadian lumber camps and harden their muscles at the strenuous job of cutting down trees. One young fellow, the fullback on one of the big Eastern elevens last fall, worked an entire summer mixing mortar for a construction company out West.

It is interesting and often amusing, the seriousness with which many young men take the matter of making their college teams. Some people say they take it entirely too seriously, that the sport is robbed of all its spontaneity and much of the element of real play. Professors throw up their hands and exclaim that the college student of to-day would rather make the football eleven than master the intricate evolutions of the disappearing root; or, as Governor Wilson expressed it when he was president of Princeton University, "The side show is beginning to swallow up the main tent." Whether we take our play too seriously or not, the fact remains that if this seriousness makes for persistency and the setting out to accomplish an object despite all obstacles, it has much to commend it.

Here is an example of how one man's seriousness and persistence stood him in good stead:

The young man in question was only a fair football player but he was a very clever drop kicker. When he was about to leave college for his vacation at the end of junior year the coach came around to his room and presented him with a brand new football.

"Take this home with you," said the coach, "and practise every chance you get this summer. Maybe something will come of it in the fall."

So the young man went home and took the football with him. He put up a goal post on a vacant lot near his home and every morning and every afternoon would find him diligently trying to kick the ball over the crossbar and between the uprights. He was very serious about it. If the ball didn't go just the way it should he tried to figure out what was the matter. He tried it from all distances and from all angles, and when he returned to college in the fall he had the satisfaction of knowing that if he couldn't kick a goal from the field it wasn't because he hadn't been serious about it.

The championship of the East that year lay between Harvard and Yale. One game of course was to decide it, and, as it happened, one short second was to decide the fortunes of that game.

With the score nothing to nothing, Harvard worked the ball down into Yale's territory in excellent position for a try for a field goal. A substitute was sent in, and standing on the 25 yard line, while 80,000 people held their breaths, the substitute calmly sent the ball spinning between the goal posts, just as he had done countless times that summer on a vacant lot near his home.

Working as life guards along the Atlantic coast is another popular summer occupation for college athletes. On the beach at Coney Island any afternoon this summer you may find three brown young giants who will lay aside their swimming suits for moleskins in the fall. In fact the seashore offers the attractive inducement of being a place where one can "get in trim" and at the same time enjoy the many pleasures of a real summer resort. Last year the crew of a 30 foot yawl was composed of five college football players, who started from New York and skirted the coast as far north as Maine, returning a few weeks later.

A number of prominent college athletes run summer camps for small boys, where they and their assistants both tutor the minds of their young charges to pass the entrance examinations and train their young bodies to take part in the sports after they get in. There are many such camps scattered through the Adirondacks and the Maine woods. They often engage in athletic contests with one another and in some cases the rivalry between two or three of the camps is very great.

Tramping parties too are much in vogue. A few summers ago three students from a middle Western university made a walking tour of the Wisconsin lake region. Part of the trip they made in canoes, but most of it on foot. In all they covered over 1,000 miles without so much as once boarding a railroad train.

An interesting and novel variation of the cross-country tramp was furnished by a young college man who one summer ran practically the length of an entire State. He also furnishes an excellent example of what seriousness and persistence can sometimes do.

This young man (not a football player, by the way, but a long distance runner) accepted as his doctrine that an athlete is made, not born; or in other words the only way to become a runner is to run. So every chance he got he ran. He ran to and from his recitations, he ran to his meals (wisely he refrained from running from his meals). He got up every morning at 5 o'clock and delivered the college newspaper on the run to the rooms of a thousand students about the campus. He distributed circulars from tailoring concerns on the run.